

TESTING SPEAKING SKILLS TO A2 STUDENTS

Abstract: *Testing speaking skills to A2 students* is a step-by-step description of a speaking test format that a representative group of students took at the end of their A2 course. A few examples of the testing tasks are presented in the test layout.

The author offers a comment on the assessment criteria and emphasizes the importance of immediate teacher feedback on students' performance after concluding the testing procedure.

Keywords: A2 speaking test logistics, speaking test tasks, assessment criteria

Introduction

It is vital that speaking skills are practised and developed alongside other language skills. This can be done by consistently making sure English is the only means of communication in class, by setting tasks where students regularly communicate with the teacher and with each other.

The purpose of the speaking test is:

- to assess the speaking skills that correspond with the language students have learnt during classes,
- on the part of the teacher, to provide immediate assessment and feedback, pointing out the students' strengths and weaknesses,
- to make sure that all students are treated fairly, irrespective of their national or linguistic background.

Student profile

The speaking test was conducted in a group of 20 students aged 20–22. The group consisted of students studying different subjects. They did not know each other at the beginning of the academic year, so my initial task was to prepare a number of communicative activities for the students to get to know one another. These activities included: classroom mingle exercises, working in pairs, forming groups of three or four. Each time I made sure that the students were put into different pairs and groups so as they did not constantly work with the same person.

The textbook used during the course was *New English File Pre-Intermediate*, regularly supplemented by extra materials.

The number of hours allocated for the group was 120 per academic year (October till June).

The level of the test

The level of students' performance was assessed on the basis of what they had achieved after approximately 90 hours of study. As stated in CEFR, a student at this level should be able to deal with day-to-day situations, such as: ordering a meal, buying things, talking about holidays, arranging to meet, finding out practical information and handling very short social exchanges.

The role of the teacher is to prepare representative tasks and choose appropriate techniques, such as interview (including questions, asking for information, describing a picture, role playing etc.) or interaction with other students (cf. Hughes, 2016; Supriyato, 2013).

Speaking materials in the classroom

There were plenty of speaking materials in the textbook. Particularly useful was the section on listening and speaking called '*Practical English*,' which followed each 'File' in the textbook.

There were a number of extra communicative tasks at the teacher's disposal in the Teacher's Book.

Also a considerable amount of speaking material was devised by the teacher herself.

Speaking test – logistics

The speaking test was scheduled for the second semester starting from April, as students had more language at their disposal. A mock speaking test reflecting the actual test was carried out beforehand. I explained what the test would look like and students did practical sample exercises as if they were doing the real test.

As far as test material preparation done on the part of the teacher is concerned, I selected and compiled items to be tested into separate sets. The topics chosen for the test mirrored the content of the textbook and the supplementary materials used in class.

Students took the test in pairs. Before April I gave them the dates of the test which corresponded to the dates of their classes. Students arranged themselves in pairs and I drew up a schedule of who and when would be taking the test. One pair was scheduled per class.

Also, I had to take care of the classroom layout, because the test took place during language classes. A designated place in a corner was arranged for the students to take the test so as not to be disturbed by others.

Test layout

The time allowed for the test was 15 minutes. At the beginning of the class the students who were scheduled to take the test sat in the designated place and picked a set of questions at random from the teacher. For example, they picked set number 2, but were allowed to see only Part 3 – the Role play. At this point they were given 5 minutes to prepare the role play. They were permitted to take notes and rehearse, but they could not use them later when presenting the role play to the teacher.

The test contained 3 parts. The teacher joined in the conversation by asking questions or giving instructions and, at the same time, acted as an assessor.

Part 1

Students responded to questions about themselves, their family or hometown, e.g., *Where are you from? Can you tell me something about your hometown? Do you have many friends in Kraków? Do you often visit your family? Would you like to go back to your hometown after graduating?*

Part 2

Describing a picture. Students were given photos to describe and I asked them extra questions connected with the photos, e.g.:



Photo by Anna Bała.

Part 3

A role play where students asked and answered each other's questions. They focused on everyday situations, for example, joining a sports centre, ordering a meal in a restaurant or buying clothes. Here is an example of a role play.

At a sports club:

a sports club employee – a customer

- *you want to do some sport*
- *say what sports can be done in the centre*
- *decide on a sport*
- *ask about the days, times and cost of classes*

Assessment

Students were assessed individually, not in relation to each other. Elements assessed during the test were: grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and interaction.

Name	Grammar 5 p.	Vocabulary 5 p.	Pronunciation 5 p.	Interaction 5 p.	Total

The teacher should bear in mind that the language resources the students use at this level are limited.

I assessed the ability to use these limited resources to communicate a message, this referred to assessing grammar and vocabulary. As for pronunciation, students' intelligibility was marked. First language interference was not penalised at this stage, as long as it did not affect communication. In the case of interaction between students and the teacher, some hesitation was expected provided it did not place any phonetic strain on the listener.

The final mark obtained was the sum of the points the students received for grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and interaction. The maximum points was 20, however to pass the test, a minimum of 12 was required.

Conclusions

There are a few positive things that I noticed and learnt from students after the test. First of all, their confidence and ability to use the language had been reinforced.

Secondly, students developed a positive attitude towards language learning and having their performance assessed: owing to the fact that they received instant feedback from the teacher, they were able to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. Immediately after the test I commented on how the students had performed by pointing out their mistakes or by asking them to self-correct through looking at the notes I had taken. Furthermore, they appreciated the fact that mistakes were discussed individually and in detail, there was room for self-correction and there was an element of learning through being aware of their own mistakes.

Although the students were given the last task before the actual test started (Part 3), in other words they communicated and weaker students could have taken advantage of being in a pair with better students, the test still reflected their performance during classes. Good students fared well, poorer students fared worse.

As for the organization of the test during classes, I had to be, as if, in two places at the same time. My role was to carry out testing and, at the same time, keep the rest of the class busy by assigning the non-tested students readings or extra exercises.

What distinguishes the test from those I had hitherto conducted is that students get immediate feedback after the test. They are asked to self-correct and their mistakes are commented on. Another thing is that there is an interaction not only with the teacher but also between the students.

In conclusion, the test should be conducted not during a regular class but on an established oral-testing day, so as to prevent both the students and the teacher from being distracted.

References

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